



# DANCE TALKS NOTES

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## RENNIE HARRIS PUREMOVEMENT: Keeping it Raw and Real

by Charmaine Patricia Warren

The New York dance scene knew of Rennie Harris Puremovement (RHPM) when as part of DanceAfrica 1995, donning loose-fitting white pants, bulked up, bare-chested and wearing sneakers, the men of RHPM flipped the page on hip-hop—taking it from the streets to the stage. They catapulted through the air with finesse and drew the crowd to their feet. The dance was *Students of The Asphalt Jungle* (1992). This was not traditional African dance, so the BAM crowd went wild. Harris remembers this as an important time because he was being introduced to the concert dance area. “This was a major paradigm shift for my company,” he recalls. “We were proud to be black, but we were like most hip-hop heads at the time, we only claimed ourselves; we didn’t acknowledge our African lineage.”

The DanceAfrica explosion came just four years after founding RHPM in 1991, and since, acknowledging and educating others of his African lineage has been tantamount in sustaining his company. Artistic director, choreographer, performer and now “Dr.,” Harris is bent on teaching the world about one of his first loves—hip-hop dance. Through workshops, lectures, residencies, and mentoring programs, Harris and his company continue to give credence to this “urban” art form. Subsequently, the junior company to RHPM, Rennie Harris Awe-Inspiring Works or RHAW, was formed in 2007 to help get the word out.

Harris was born and raised in an African-American community in North Philadelphia and was inspired to dance and make dances because he saw Don Campbell’s dance group, “The Campbell Lockers.” His first dance group, Cobra III, formed when he was 12, was made up of his brother William Harris (“Dollar Bill”) and “Brainy,” a friend. During his teen years he formed other groups, including the Step Masters, but it was the Scanner Boys, a pop and lock crew that would put Harris and his talent on the hip-hop map in the 80s. Harris also performed on one of the first organized hip-hop and rap touring shows called the “Fresh Festival,” where notable hip-hop stars such as Run DMC, Curtis Blow, and Whodini were presented. In the 90s, as a founding member of Philadelphia’s music and dance ensemble, Splinter Group, he performed in the city’s “Movement Theater International Festival.” The Scanner Boys would perform for the last time in 1992 as part of “Dancing in the Streets” in Philadelphia, possibly allowing more time for RHPM. Also in 1992, a chance to further his choreographic pursuits came with an invitation from the Susan Hess Choreographer’s Project known for offering space and support to artists. This hometown support helped to “legitimize” his journey into the concert dance world. Meanwhile, on the streets, the artistry of hip-hop culture was upheld through the four elements of hip-hop coined by Afrika Bambaataa a DJ from the South Bronx. The elements are: music (DJ-ing), graffiti, emcee-ing (rapping), and breakdance. A fifth element, “knowledge,” was added later. Steadfast with new ideals, but honoring hip-hop’s foundation, Harris soon became the hip-hop choreographer of note, revolutionizing the genre by keeping it raw and real. Over and over, as he puts it, “[He] had one foot in the streets and one foot on the stage.”

Harris never really took to the title “choreographer.” In an interview for *Time Out New York* he explains: “We didn’t call it choreography. We called it routines. I didn’t know there was a word to describe what I was doing, but I created routines...with my crew. It wasn’t until 1991 that someone actually said the word choreography to me—I’d heard it by then, but I never said, “I’m going to choreograph” or “I’m the choreographer.” Notwithstanding the confines of defining the term “choreographer,” Harris has been making work that is recognized and rewarded by the dance

community. Early works were driven by personal stories, while later works have morphed into a universal view. What is more, his works often push audiences toward the unexpected. For instance, he sometimes makes work specifically for women, he may use rock instead of hip-hop music, and, as in *Rome & Jewels* (1999), his first evening-length work, he juxtaposed Shakespearean text with *Ebonics*. His approach comes from a visceral place, and in a way, he dares audiences to come along for the ride.

Long since their DanceAfrica debut, RHPM became known nationally and internationally, and still they are remembered as a group of talented male dancers. Though not always a known fact, the original company was comprised of both men and women. Actually, *Students of the Asphalt* was originally performed and choreographed for men and women, but, says Harris, "...they didn't have shirts off at the time." As he puts it, "...the issues at the time were male-driven, like men on men violence, and I began to address them. But, up until *Rome & Jewels*, they only hired us for *Asphalt*." That didn't stop him from making work then, nor does it now. Harris says, "I'm choreographing every day. I'm choreographing on other companies, I'm choreographing on students, I'm choreographing on both companies...RHPM challenges me mentally, and RHAW challenges me viscerally."

Some other RHPM works that continue to define Harris are *P-Funk*, an energizing work that follows the words from the music of the same name, the politically charged *March of the Antmen*, and Harris' haunting popping and locking solo *Endangered Species*. There is also the cypher inspired *Continuum*; the Bessie Award-winning *Rome & Jewels*, Harris' version of *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet*; *Facing Mekka*, his second evening-length work that traces the roots of hip hop; and *Lorenzo's Oil* another solo for Harris described as butoh style hip-hop dance. His most recent works are *100 Naked Locks*, a hip-hop sci-fi project; *Heaven*, an all-B-girl piece to Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*; plus the evening-length work to rock music, *Love, American Style*.

In the concert dance world, Harris garnered myriad awards including three Bessies, two Black Theater Alvin Ailey Awards, a nomination for an Herb Alpert Award, and another for the Lawrence Olivier Award in the U.K. He was voted one of the most influential people in the last one hundred years of Philadelphia history, was awarded the key to the cities of Miami and Philadelphia, awarded a medal from the Kennedy Center (DC) as a master of African American Choreography, was featured in Rose Eichenbaum's *Masters of Movement-Portraits of America's Great Choreographers*, and has been compared to dance icons Alvin Ailey and Bob Fosse. But this is just the short list.

Making good on his promise to educate, Harris' began the "Illadelph Legends of Hip-hop Festival" in 1997 to document and honor legends by bringing them together to teach, lecture, discuss and perform. This Festival helps to give hip-hop structure. Some legends have included Don Campbell (creator of Campbell Locking), Boogaloo Sam (creator of Boogaloo & Popping) and the Electric Boogaloos (pioneers of boogaloo and popping), and Crazy Legs and Lil Lep of the Rock Steady Crew (pioneers of B-boying), among many others. Harris maintains, "...as long as you know your history, you should be good ... you're acknowledging all of those people who created it."

Hip-hop is global. Hip-hop is a dance form that has become codified with varying styles. Hip-hop is here to stay and Harris, often called the "Father of Hip-hop" is highly responsible. Harris shares this, "One of the things I am most often called is a visionary. I think that is interesting. A visionary, I am not. In my opinion, the language/culture of Hip-hop is the visionary and through it I have been able to see...I will continue to push the envelope, take risks and never ever compromise...ever. Hip-hop is really about living within the moment that exists."

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